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Bicultural Perceptions on Expertise in Teaching

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Abstract

This study used Borg's (2006) framework of teacher cognition to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of L2 expert teachers. Two participants were selected to represent different groups of EFL teachers in Japanese university settings. One is a native speaker of English who was educated in the United States while the other is a native speaker of Japanese who has received education in both Japan and the United States. Data were collected from interviews in which each participant described their experiences with an expert teacher. In addition, participants discussed how their perceptions of expert teachers influence their teaching practice today. The data revealed that despite differences in language, culture, and education, both teachers identified similar characteristics that they believe expert teachers should possess. However, the findings also uncover some significant differences in their perceptions of L2 expert teachers. Finally, the results are discussed in terms of implications for members of the academic community, such as teacher educators.

Introduction

Teachers often have a role model that they aspire to emulate, or certain beliefs about teacher expertise. However, teachers differ in their perceptions of the essential qualities expert teachers should possess. According to Borg (2003), teacher cognition, which refers to what teachers know, think, and believe, varies based on their previous experience as a learner, teacher trainee, and the teaching context they are in, including classroom practice. Therefore, members of the second language (L2) teaching community, where teachers differ in terms of cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds, hold different beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching. Understanding what perceptions of expertise in L2 teaching teachers possess is important to create an environment that reflects various teacher beliefs about effective teaching, thus facilitating professional development for a particular context, and expanding on the research in L2 teaching expertise. Therefore, this study examines the complex perceptions

of expert teachers held by two university teachers in Japan, each of whom represents a typical type of English instructor in this teaching context.

Teacher Expertise

Although the field of teacher expertise has produced several studies in general education (e.g., Borko & Livingston, 1989; Bullough & Baughman, 1995; Smith & Strahan, 2004), researchers in this area often describe major methodological problems in conducting their studies (e.g., Berliner, 1986; Dodds, 1994). First, there are no established criteria for selecting expert teachers, particularly in higher education and even more so in foreign language settings. Whereas some fields can use objective measurements for comparison, evaluating teachers involves judgments that are more subjective. Researching teachers requires the consideration of numerous variables that are difficult to assess using quantitative methods, particularly because each classroom, content area, student, and learning outcome is dynamic and cannot simply be compared based on shared criteria.

Another issue related to this lack of fixed criteria concerns the interpretation of previous research findings. Because of the inconsistent criteria used by researchers resulting from the ambiguous definitions of their "expert" participants, it is difficult to generalize the findings across studies (Palmer, Stough, Burdenski, & Gonzales, 2005). In fact, researchers often use the terms *expert*, *effective*, and *experienced* interchangeably to label teachers in contrastive studies of pre-service or novice teachers. However, it is important to understand that though experience is one of the essential elements to qualify someone as an expert teacher, it is insufficient on its own (Berliner, 1986; Johnson, 2005; Tsui, 2005). Accordingly, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) have defined and distinguished two types of professionals at different stages of development: experts and experienced nonexperts. Contrary to novice teachers, differentiating expert teachers from experienced nonexperts is difficult because the distinction between the two is not apparent in typical classroom situations. As noted, it "is not that one does things well and the other does things badly" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993, p. 11). Therefore, understanding the factors and characteristics that distinguish these two types of teacher is important to further knowledge in the field of teaching expertise.

Furthermore, the definition of expert teacher is greatly affected by context, for example, the cultural and educational paradigm in which the teaching occurs. For that reason, research that is context specific and investigates the sociocultural factors of expertise in teaching is necessary. For example, Berliner (2001) explained that the educational culture of the United States values student participation in the teacher-learning process. In contrast, Shimahara and Sakai (as cited in Tsui, 2005) described how emotional commitment to students is considered the primary condition for teaching in Japan. Each context requires a unique definition of expertise. Therefore, criteria of expertise that are more

context-dependent should be developed.

However, creating criteria to define an expert teacher, which are applicable in an L2 setting, is often problematic. Expertise in teaching requires subjective judgment, which is influenced greatly by individual teachers. This is because factors such as the teachers' education as learners and/or student teachers can influence their teacher cognition (Borg, 2003). It is evident that teachers from different educational backgrounds possess varied notions about what constitutes an expert teacher. Therefore, using criteria that are applicable to all L2 teachers, from diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, is a challenge.

Finally, although a small number of expertise studies have been conducted in L2 settings (e.g., Farrell, 2013; Gatbonton, 1999; Tsui, 2003), to this point, no L2 expertise studies have focused on teachers' perceptions of what constitutes an expert teacher. In order to understand the true nature of expert teachers in L2 settings, it is necessary first to investigate the perceptions that various teachers within the same context have of expert teachers.

Conceptual Framework: Teacher Cognition

A conceptual framework of teacher cognition (Borg, 2003) is used to examine various factors that influence L2 teachers' perceptions of expert teachers. Numerous terms have been used to describe teachers' complex mental lives, such as teacher beliefs, knowledge, and maxims. However, Borg (2006) has argued that knowledge and beliefs are closely interconnected. Therefore, he has suggested using the term *teacher cognition*, which includes what teachers know, believe, and think (Borg, 2003). This framework does not only regard knowledge and belief to be intertwined, but also provides influential factors that affect teacher cognition. These include teachers' previous learning experience (Schooling), their experience as teacher trainees (Professional Coursework), and contextual factors including classroom practice and teaching practice. The final three factors are also influenced by teacher cognition (see Figure 1).

The purpose of this study is to examine L2 teachers' understanding of what constitutes expertise in teaching, particularly in Japanese universities, and to investigate the following research questions:

1. What perceptions of expert teachers do two experienced teachers from different cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds share?
2. How do their perceptions of expert teachers differ?
3. How do their perceptions of expert teachers affect their approaches to teaching?

Methodology

Selection of Participants

This study aims to investigate teachers' perceptions of expert teachers. However, the criteria for finding expert teachers by Palmer et al. (2005) were used because, as Sternberg and Horvath (1995) have argued, focusing on experienced

effective teachers would provide more narrow and well-defined characteristics of expert teachers. The selection of participants was conducted in two stages, an initial screening stage that focused on experience in a particular context, and a further screening stage that examined teaching performance indicators. The first stage screened for teachers who had a minimum of three years' experience in a specific teaching content area with a particular population of students. Moreover, teachers were required to have relevant educational background as reflected in certification and degrees. The second stage required a nomination for exemplary teaching by multiple constituencies, such as fellow teachers, researchers, administrators, or teacher educators. Palmer et al. (2005) suggest confirming participants' impact on students' performance. However, this study focuses on teachers in a university setting where there is often no requirement to take standardized tests at the end of semester. Therefore, this criterion was eliminated.

In order to select participants, I first explained my research purposes to various English teachers in Japanese universities and asked them to recommend a teacher well known to them who met the criteria. A shortlist of names was created based on these recommendations. I then sought confirmation and justification of the recommended teachers' credentials from a second source, in order to avoid bias issues. Finally, two participants that represented each category of teacher and met the criteria were selected upon their agreement to participate in the study.

Participants

Two participants, Keith and Asako[1], were selected for the study. Keith is an American male who is a full time instructor at a private university. He has a Master's degree in ESL from an American university. He has been teaching full time at private universities in Japan for nine years. He is also involved in curriculum design and runs a program where he assists other full time and part time teachers. He was recommended by a former colleague, and his nomination was confirmed by a current colleague.

Asako, a Japanese female teacher, is a part time instructor at a national and private university. She received her first Master's degree in Philosophy from a Japanese university and another Master's degree in Linguistics from an American university. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at a Japanese university. She has taught in several Japanese universities over a period of 24 years. She was recommended by her supervisor, and her selection was confirmed by a current colleague.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in February 2014. I interviewed Keith for 45 minutes and Asako for 80 minutes. Both participants were asked about their educational background and teaching practices and how they related to teachers and colleagues that they considered

[1] Both names are pseudonyms.

expert teachers. All interviews were conducted individually in the participant's L1 and audio-recorded with permission from participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using several coding methods. First, structuring data coding was applied (MacQueen et al., as cited in Saladaña, 2013). This process allowed the coding and categorization of "the data corpus to examine comparable segments' commonalities, differences, and relationships" (Saladaña, 2013, p. 84) between two participants discussing different topics. In addition, emotion coding and values coding (Saladaña, 2013) were used. Emotion coding was used particularly when the participants reflected on the emotional impact that expert teachers had had on them when they were teachers or students. Value coding was used to code the data that demonstrated the participants' beliefs about teaching and learning. Interviews were transcribed in full in English and Japanese. The Japanese transcription was later translated into English. Member checking was conducted following transcription and translation.

Findings

Keith and Asako described the characteristics of expert teachers that they had had when they were students in relation to their current perceptions of expert teachers. The conceptual framework of teacher cognition was used to analyze how previous experience as a high school student (Schooling) and a graduate student (Professional Coursework), respectively closely interacted with their teacher cognition, including their classroom practice today.

Keith

Keith's reflection on an expert high school math teacher, Mr. Smith, was characterized by how the teacher engaged students effectively through stories. Keith stated that Mr. Smith "would put stories into his teaching. He would talk about his family, or about growing up, or he would tell stories about famous mathematicians." He also said that Mr. Smith "would tell a story, and he went to the formula. Normally, many high school students probably memorized this is Euclid's formula or whatever, but he would have fleshed it out, given us a little bit of a perspective." This demonstrates Keith's perception about how expert teachers possess pedagogical content knowledge, which is believed to be one of the most important aspects of knowledge that expert teachers have (e.g., Dodds, 1994; Richards, Li, & Tang, 1995).

Pedagogical content knowledge is related to how a teacher can deliver subject matter through "the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, and explanations, and demonstrations" (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). Keith explained how Mr. Smith's stories had helped him "in terms of motivation." He continued, "If you just see the formula, you memorize it. You are less likely to remember or able to use it if you don't have an image. I am

very context dependent, so that really helped me. " An expert teacher's ability to integrate students' interests and learning objectives is also found in the study by Tsui (2003). It is clear that Keith believes that Mr. Smith's rich pedagogical content knowledge facilitated his learning.

What is salient about Mr. Smith's pedagogical content knowledge is that it not only facilitated better comprehension but also interest in the content. Keith stated, "He taught me in a way that kept me engaged" because telling stories "really made his content more interesting, it kept people's attention." He also said, "He'd taught to us through that (story) or just told us that and it just makes the content a little more interesting." This indicates how Mr. Smith made the content more interesting rather than merely comprehensible through stories.

Keith also discussed how Mr. Smith was different from other nonexpert teachers. He explained that many teachers teach their subject in a way that people who like the subject do, not realizing that "maybe half the class isn't that type of learner." He continued, "So he (Mr. Smith) was maybe acknowledging that not everybody thinks that way." This is a factor that influences Keith's teacher cognition today. He stated, "I try to recognize that a lot of our students are required to take the subject, some maybe have a reason to take it but they are not motivated naturally by the content. We have to go to where they are."

Recognizing individual students, which is the rich knowledge of learners experienced teachers have is often intertwined with pedagogical content knowledge (Johnston & Goettsch, 2000). Learner knowledge includes teachers' beliefs about how learners learn and what learners know. One way that Mr. Smith applied his learner knowledge through pedagogical content knowledge was to teach the class from the students' perspective. Keith explained that Mr. Smith "tried to explain from the eye of his students" and "recognize from their (students') point of view." He stated that Mr. Smith could "tell stories about mathematicians. He often told stories about when he (Euclid) was a student, so you can imagine this famous mathematician, and how to see him as a student like us." By relating the topic to what seemed relevant to his learners, Mr. Smith made learning more interesting and engaging. Keith stated, "I think that's kind of what Mr. Smith was doing, he was going where a high school student's mind is."

Mr. Smith's rich knowledge about learners also enabled him to work with different types of students. Keith discussed how Mr. Smith helped one of his smartest classmates to develop an original proof of the Pythagorean theorem, which he later published. Keith stated that Mr. Smith "appeals to different types of learners," including those who were naturally talented at the subject and those who were initially not motivated to study math like Keith. This reflects Keith's perceptions that expert teachers do not only have extensive knowledge about learners but also connect their knowledge to best facilitate students' learning based on levels of interest and understanding of the subject.

Another aspect of knowledge about learners is the affective impact that Mr. Smith had on Keith and his classmates because the class went "beyond the content." Keith stated, "Even though we were just high school students, he saw it

as more than just teaching us a required subject." He added, "this excellent teacher guiding and motivating, showing that there's more than what's in the textbook, more than what's required." Keith also explained that the stories Mr. Smith shared "would often illustrate some point about life or about passion." He stated, "We grew to respect him and like him more because we also saw that he had a wider range of knowledge and experience than just problems on the board." Keith explained that even though he did not like math, "I got involved in that (course) because he was involved in it. He asked me to join it." This demonstrates Keith's belief that expert teachers do not only play a role as those who deliver knowledge but also serve as role models who can inspire students to exceed their expectations of themselves. When asked what kind of influence expert teachers have on students, Keith stated that what experts teach "ends up being wider than a course content." He continued, "Those are the teachers where students say, 'You've inspired me to choose a different career path. I became a teacher because of that teacher.' That's probably the greatest compliment expert teachers can get. They can inspire someone to become a teacher."

It is clear that Keith believes that expert teachers possess rich knowledge about learners that is connected to pedagogical content knowledge. This procedural knowledge allows expert teachers to best deliver knowledge by stimulating students' interest. In addition, expert teachers can inspire different types of students on a personal level and help them realize their potential in life through content instruction.

Asako

Asako identified Susan, a professor from her graduate program in the U.S., as an expert teacher. There are two salient characteristics about Susan. One is that she has a clear goal for individual students, and the other is that she assists students by providing constructive feedback and creating an ideal environment to help them reach their goals.

After completing her Master's degree in Philosophy, Asako went to the U.S. to study in a Master's program. She chose an applied track, which focused more on the practical side of linguistics in the hope of obtaining a teaching position when she returned to Japan. She discussed how studying at an American university was a huge challenge because "My English was bad, a lot worse (than others'), and I just could not do the same things that other students with a TESOL background could do." Asako discussed how Susan had goals, which differed depending on the student. She said:

> She had a goal for those students (with a TESOL background) to achieve, which was different from the goal she had for me. So, she would ask students to do something that was appropriate for their level, but she also had a goal that we all had to reach, and she knew how to get us there. She had an image about where we had to reach, and she knew exactly what we needed to do each step of the way.

This demonstrates Susan's rich knowledge about individual students. This

knowledge was also transferred to her pedagogical content knowledge. Susan set up appropriate activities for individuals rather than giving them all the same task, without compromising the learning objectives of the course. Shulman (1986) identified this as a crucial aspect of pedagogical content knowledge that it "includes an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult" (p. 9). Asako continued:

> She pushed each group of students in different ways. Everyone took about a year and a half or two years at most to reach where she wanted them to reach. If they didn't, they couldn't pass the class, so almost everyone reached a goal. Everyone. She had a clear goal that she had in mind, and no matter where people started, she clearly knew what had to be done and when it had to be done.

Asako also discussed Susan's ability to mentor students by providing immediate and detailed feedback. She said, "(Susan) took care of students really well", and she provided examples such as, "If I submitted something, she would always read everything, and her comments started with 'this was good' and she would write up an A4 page worth of comments for everyone. And she returned the comments the following day or class." She continued:

> (Susan) would ask us "So how are you guys going to take advantage of this advice?" Then we (she and her partner) would take it home and write about how we would take advantage (of her comments), how we would make an improvement, and she read them all. I think I may have them all, all her comments.

Furthermore, Asako compared Susan to another nonexpert teacher from the program, stating that "She is good, but the difference between her and Susan is she is sloppy." She continued, "She would stop giving students feedback. She said she was too busy to do it." Asako explained how Susan stood in contrast to this:

> I never heard (Susan) say she was too busy to do something during the two years I asked Susan for advice or was close to her. She never showed that she was busy. So if I said, "thank you," she would be like, "What? Of course."

What can be inferred from these comments is that Asako believes that expert teachers are dedicated to their job by working hard to assist student learning even outside the classroom. They also have extensive knowledge about learners that allows them to set realistic goals and scaffold their learning by providing consistent support.

Another anecdote Asako shared about her expert teacher concerned the affective impact she provided. Asako discussed a conflict she had with the partner she worked closely with. She described her partner as someone who was Caucasian and "did a lot of unfair things." Asako felt she was asked to pair up because "I was easy to manipulate." Asako also thought her partner knew Asako's English was poor. Asako said Susan was "watching us" and solved the problem through intervention. Asako explained, "(Susan) came in between us, and she just said, 'You guys are not going to work together anymore. There is no point in doing pair work anymore.' She just drew a line for me like that." Asako reflected on this

experience by saying that "(Because of her) I didn't have to be all depressed. I could reach my goal, I could finish my coursework." This demonstrates Asako's perception about how expert teachers can have an affective impact on students. Asako felt watched over by this teacher who provided her with a safe environment in which she could focus on learning to reach the goal that the teacher had set for her.

Asako's perception about teaching expertise influences her teaching today in several ways. For example, she discussed how she tries to check students' work as Susan did, by marking tests, for example, as quickly as possible. In addition, she stated, "I never want to tell my students that I am too busy to return their work." This reflects a strong influence she received from Susan that she integrates in her own practice. Moreover, she discussed how she encourages students emotionally as Susan did for her. She said, "I would tell my students not to give up. I think giving up is the end of everything. I want to communicate with my students so that they don't give up." What Asako learned from her expert teacher is how to maximize students' learning by providing support and encouragement. Her experience as a struggling student, who received physical and mental support from Susan, has had a huge impact on her teacher cognition today.

Discussion

Both participants describe similar characteristics of an expert teacher. First, they discussed how these teachers demonstrated rich learner knowledge. Their classroom practice reflected their knowledge about students' differing motivational and proficiency levels in addition to expectations they had about the class. This supports Smith and Strahan's (2004) findings that rich learner knowledge is one of the prototypical characteristics of expert teachers. These expert teachers also adjusted their teaching to meet individual needs, interests, and knowledge by connecting learner knowledge to pedagogical content knowledge. For example, Asako discussed how Susan customized goals for individual students. Susan understood what Asako needed to learn and what needed to be done to help her reach her goal. This reflects Susan's deep knowledge about Asako in addition to her pedagogical content knowledge to set a realistic goal for Asako. Keith also discussed Mr. Smith's ability to work effectively with students who had different levels of knowledge and interest in math in comparison to other nonexpert teachers' classes that did not reflect knowledge of learners Both Keith and Asako's thick descriptions about rich learner knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge demonstrated by their expert teachers indicate their belief that this is an essential quality for expert teachers.

In addition, these expert teachers had an emotional impact on both participants. For example, Keith's attitude toward the subject of math changed because of Mr. Smith, leading him to take an extra math class. Asako felt she was able to accomplish her goal of completing her Master's degree in the United States because of Susan's constant encouragement and support. Both expert teachers

affected the participants positively, not only by providing them with new knowledge, but also by making an emotional contribution to their personal lives. In addition to enriching their knowledge about a content area, Keith and Asako believe expert teachers could also have an emotional impact on students' personal lives and attitudes toward learning.

Although they both explained the meaningful influence of expert teachers, Asako focused more on her direct interaction with the teacher. She explained how Susan gave her tailored and consistent support not only inside but also outside the classroom. She described Susan as someone who was always willing to help students. Furthermore, Susan assisted Asako's learning emotionally. This supports the finding of a previous study that indicated the importance of the emotional commitment that teachers demonstrate in Japan (Shimahara & Sakai, as cited in Tsui, 2005). Asako felt a strong bond with Susan, who created an ideal learning environment by providing individual support. It is evident that dedication to assist students academically and emotionally on a personal basis is what Asako values as a quality of expert teachers.

On the other hand, Keith emphasized how inspiring Mr. Smith was for students. Keith believes that expert teachers have rich learner and pedagogical content knowledge, which allows them to encourage students' interest and motivation to learn about the topic. However, more importantly, expert teachers have an ability to make the content relevant to students' lives. It is clear that Keith has a perception that expert teachers can guide students beyond the content by sharing life experiences and providing a role model. Contrary to Asako, Keith did not discuss how "hard" Mr. Smith worked to assist students. This may be because Asako was an international student who needed extra help from her professor. However, it is clear that Asako values teacher-student interactions supported by the teacher's dedication to helping students. In contrast, Keith values expert teachers' rich knowledge about learners intertwined with pedagogical content knowledge to effectively teach classes and inspire students.

Finally, as Borg's (2003) framework suggests, the participants' schooling has influenced their approach to teaching today. Both Keith and Asako discussed how they tried to model the practice of their expert teachers in their own teaching. A 2003 study in expertise by Tsui argues that current teaching practice, such as teaching and learning, is more influential to expert teachers than schooling. Although these participants are not defined as expert teachers in this study, the data from this study illustrate that the participants' experience of interacting with expert teachers positively facilitated both participants to be more effective teachers.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First, it relies solely on a limited amount of interview data. Classroom observations would be helpful in revealing how the participants' perceptions of expert teachers are reflected in their actual

teaching and interactions with learners. As Borg (2006) argues, it is vital to examine teachers' classroom practice in the study of teacher cognition. In the future, classroom observations will be included to understand the link between perception and practice. In addition, more participants should be included in order to refine perceptions about expert teachers. Finally and most importantly, a second Japanese participant who has only been educated in Japan should be included in order to represent one of the largest groups of English teachers in a Japanese university.

Conclusion

This study attempted to investigate perceptions that English teachers in Japanese universities have about expert teachers. Teacher cognition was used as a framework to understand the elements of their perceptions and how they were formed. Though their descriptions of two expert teachers did not match perfectly, there are still commonalities between the two teachers. First, both participants believe pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge about learners are crucial characteristics of an expert teacher. In addition, they believe expert teachers have an affective impact on their students. Finally, the participants' experience as students and student teachers has influenced their teacher cognition to this day. This provides important implications for teacher educators to consider the unique perceptions that students and teachers bring to their program. In addition, teachers and teacher educators should understand that their approach to teaching English and interactions with students often have an ever-lasting impact on their students' perceptions about the content, teachers, and learning.

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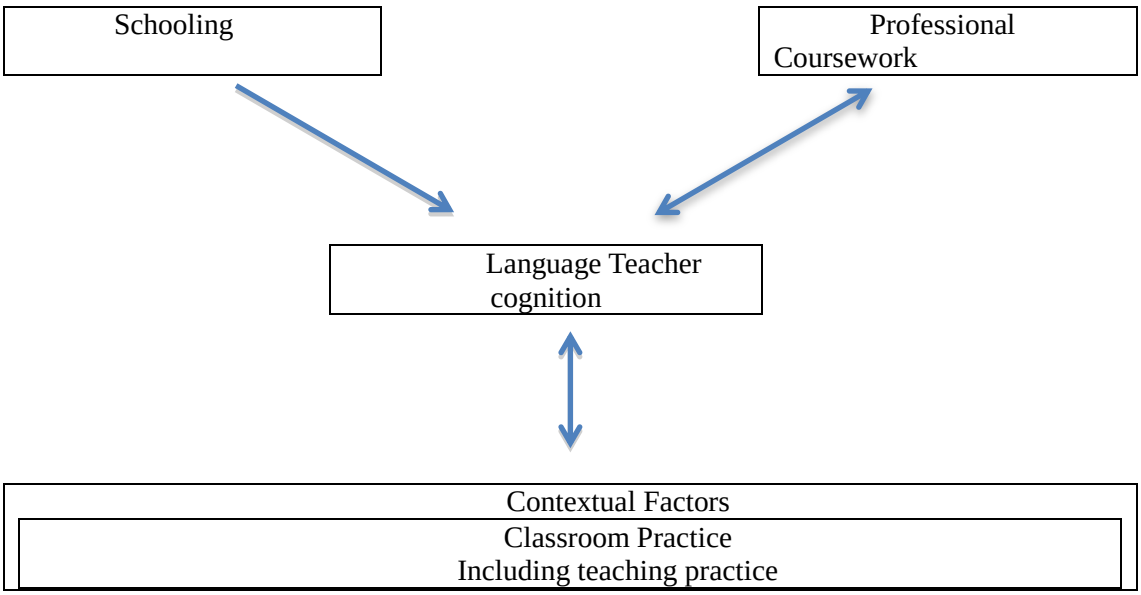

Figure 1. Elements and processes in language teacher cognition (Borg, 2006, p. 283)

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Please think about the best teacher you have had as a student. Tell me about them.
2. Please think about the best teacher you have had as a teacher. Tell me about them.
3. What do you think guides their teaching?
4. How do they communicate with students?
5. How are they different from good teachers?
6. How do they develop their expertise?
7. Do they influence your teaching today? If so, in what ways?
8. What is your idea of an expert teacher?